Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* by Jose O. Fernandez (The Ohio State University Press)

by Laura Irwin | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Jose O. Fernandez's *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* is an innovative project that takes conversations about literary and cultural history in a new direction. Recognizing the efforts of Black and Latinx scholars in crafting distinct literary traditions and histories, Fernandez uses his book to argue for cross-ethnic literary studies and identify similarities between Black and Latinx traditions. This endeavor revolutionizes conversations about literary history of the United States and challenges narratives of exclusion and silencing. This book serves to show the importance of knowing the names of authors and artists, and the communities that fought for them, because they make up the fabric of US history. To learn those names next to Faulkner, Twain, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald not only makes them part of American literary tradition but also spotlights their absence and exclusion in a way that expands the boundaries of "literary tradition." This review takes seriously Fernandez's project, which opens exciting avenues for cross-ethnic historic study while also examining opportunities for future study.

KEYWORDS Black studies, Latinx, United States, cultural studies, history, humanities, literary studies, literature, mapping, narrative

Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures. By Jose O. Fernandez. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022. 216 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-8142-5849-1 US List: $34.95.

During a moment of both the visibility of Black and Latinx literatures and exclusion vis-à-vis book bans, questions of whose voice and story are included in narratives

of United States history are currently central. Although white supremacy and coloniality work to maintain an oppressive narrative that perpetuates exclusion and silencing, critical scholars such as Jose O. Fernandez are radically resisting this suppression by elevating Black and Latinx authors and their works. In *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* (2022) Fernandez responds to this kairotic moment by honoring the legacy of Black and Latinx authors who developed distinct literary traditions and by mapping historic similarities between their literary traditions and shared histories to build solidarity based on current disenfranchisement. In doing so, he calls for generation of "cross-ethnic literary studies . . . to show instances of shared historical, cultural, and literary struggles that unite writers and people of color in the US" (10). This call powerfully works to take current conversations about the US narrative history and literary inclusion/exclusion in a new direction.

Fernandez is part of an emerging group of scholars and methods that conducts cross-racial and comparative analysis of Black and Latinx communities with a specific emphasis on the development of their literary traditions in this book. *Against Marginalization* is a groundbreaking project with ambitious goals to not only recognize and build cross-ethnic solidarity based on shared experiences of exclusion and perseverance but also to carve out a space in literary studies to explore shared histories and stylistic qualities.

In the Introduction, "Contextualizing Black and Latinx Literatures," and Chapter 1, "Convergences in Black and Latinx Literary Histories through Publishing," Fernandez contextualizes a number of Black and Latinx authors writing in the colonial period through the 1970s and the Black and Latinx independent publishing infrastructures developed to support them. Black and Latinx communities are the backbone of their respective literary traditions because they established their own readerships and print cultures to distribute Black and Latinx voices. Fernandez insightfully shows that these communities and infrastructures serve as the life-force that sustains the accomplishments of Black and Latinx

writers in the past and present. Readers may find it troubling when Fernandez suggests that the goal for Black and Latinx authors was to be included in mainstream publishing to reach white audiences (40). I wonder if all the writers he selected were attempting to be included in the dominant US publishing industry, or were they more concerned with creating an alternative public sphere which adhered to their own shared cultural ethics. Being included in the teaching of US literary history and adding voices to the US narrative are very different from wanting to be included by mainstream publishers and Fernandez falls short in attending to these distinctions of inclusion and does not go far enough to question whether inclusion is truly the goal for each of these authors or if inclusion *should* be the goal.

The bulk of the book consists of case studies in which Fernandez juxtaposes a Black author and a Latinx author and describes their shared literary aesthetics. For instance, in chapter 2, Fernandez argues that Amiri Baraka's *The Slave* (1964) and Luis Valdez's *Bandido!* (1981) engage postmodernism in their respective theater traditions to depict nationalist aspirations. These works, according to Fernandez, are examples of Black and Latinx engagement in postmodern tradition in order to challenge the fixed, monolithic, objective reality of US history by reclaiming "previously overlooked figures in dominant historical discourses and offer them agency to recreate and alter the historical memory of each group" (78).

Chapters 3 and 4 serve to demonstrate the complexity and non-monolothic nature of Black and Latinx authors to challenge generalizations made about these communities and their literary contributions. In chapter 3, Fernandez describes the works of James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) as examples of how authors balanced their aesthetic goals with social preoccupations in their stories of the devastating effects of war on Black and Latinx communities. In chapter 4, he describes the works of Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986),

and Richard Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation* (1992) and *Brown* (2002) to demonstrate how Black and Latinx authors resisted the burden of social protest and instead argued that cultural development was the result of "cultural exchanges among different racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups from the country's formation to contemporary times" (105). Reading Baldwin, Anaya, Ellison, and Rodriguez, Fernandez acknowledges how Black and Latinx authors throughout history have grappled with incorporating social consciousness or remaining "apolitical" in their work (124). Fernandez's discussion represents a restricting binary for Black and Latinx authors—whether to incorporate social consciousness or be apolitical (with the underlying implications being that to be socially conscious is to be socially responsible and representative of their respective group or to forego social responsibility and thus be dismissive of marginalized experiences). I wonder if Black and Latinx Studies scholars might find this somewhat simplistic or at least lacking necessary nuance in discussing the alternatives to either route.

Chapters 5 and 6 situate Black and Latinx authors within modernism and literary naturalism, respectively, to inscribe Black and Latinx stories, communities, and experiences into the US literary tradition.These chapters detail the effects of living in oppressive economic systems which led to cycles of poverty, and the role of these authors and their works in opening a window to the interlocking systems of oppression at play for Black and Latinx communities. Authors and their stories, such as Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), use modernist techniques in their respective descriptions of agricultural experiences of Black sharecroppers and Latinx farmworkers. Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City* (1992) and Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) use literary naturalism to demonstrate the destructive impact of oppressive economic systems experienced by urban communities of color.

Frequently throughout the book, Fernandez establishes that he doesn't conflate the distinctions between Black and Latinx histories. He acknowledges the

significance of developing distinct literary traditions and argues that solidarity can be built on recognizing similarities. Fernandez chose to juxtapose certain authors based on similar aesthetic literary styles, similar genres, similar experiences with exclusion from the mainstream literary tradition, and similar fights for social recognition. Nevertheless, in his efforts to honor the particularities of Black and Latinx histories, Fernandez draws lines between the communities creating a confusing paradox within the book. He titles each of his case studies "convergences" (which suggest intersections that challenge the segregation and categorization created by white supremacy) but then maintains those categories by describing Black and Latinx authors separately. In doing so, he misses the moments when those communities spoke to each other or the identities that cross each community, such as AfroLatinx or mixed-race individuals. I understand that state and community-based identity structures often historically resulted in the exclusion and silencing of Afro-Latinx or mixed race authors. This makes it difficult for Fernandez to identify such intersections; still, the word "convergences" signals a promise that falls short.

Having said that, the complexity of navigating the balance between avoiding conflation and maintaining strict oppressive categories is not an easy task. This book tackles this complexity by modeling what it looks like to conduct comparative analysis by describing the impact of distinct racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences of Black and Latinx authors while also demonstrating their similar experiences with being excluded from mainstream US literary traditions while fighting for recognition for their respective communities. Therefore, I commend Fernandez's project and appreciate the strategic power of identifying parallels between these communities the potential for uniting Black and Latinx literary traditions and cultural communities, rather than perpetuating divisions among them.

After reading the book, I am left with the question: what would Fernandez like readers to do with the similarities he identifies, beyond recognizing them and

including them in discussions of US literary history? Given the unprecedented nature of this type of study, it is understandable that Fernandez's first task was identifying these similarities and leaving for later what to do with/about them. Additionally, he may have left this question unanswered to allow his readers and students the opportunity to explore and create meaning for themselves.Ultimately, *Against Marginalization* is an innovative project in which Fernandez honors Black and Latinx literary ancestry. Through this book, Fernandez himself becomes an ancestor for future scholars by making space to recognize and build solidarity based on shared experiences with exclusion and with efforts toward community, perseverance, and voice.

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Article details

Laura Irwin, "Review of *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* by Jose O. Fernandez (The Ohio State University Press),"

Lateral 12.2 (2023).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.2.XX

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ISSN 2469-4053